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Criminal Justice Research Division, SANDAG

Gang Involvement Among San Diego County Arrestees in 2009

December 2010

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GANG INVOLVEMENT AMONG SAN DIEGO COUNTY ARRESTEES IN 2009

Project Overview

According to the most recent National Youth Gang Survey (National Youth Gang Center, 2009), a steady resurgence of gang problems has occurred in many jurisdictions in recent years. In San Diego County, current estimates are that the region is home to around 170 different gangs with approximately 7,700 members (San Diego Police Department, 2010). Over the past few years, a variety of new strategies and collaborations have been implemented across the region with local, state, and federal funding for comprehensive strategies to address gang-related crime. Possibly reflecting the successfulness of these efforts, in 2009, the percent of homicides in which motive could be determined that was attributed to gangs decreased to 26 percent from 31 percent in 2008 (Keaton & Burke, 2010).

This SANDAG CJ Bulletin is the fourth in a series[1] highlighting findings from data collected as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of this project, adult and juvenile arrestees are approached within 48 hours of their arrest (and booking) to conduct an interview regarding their drug use and other recent behaviors. Beginning in 2008, arrestees who reported any gang affiliation[2], either in the past (if within five years) or currently, were asked to complete an addendum regarding their involvement with the gang, including how it started, how it related to involvement in illegal activity, and any desire they had to leave the gang. This research bulletin presents this information, including analyses by arrestee age (adult or juvenile sample) and gender.

[1] The first three bulletins, summarizing results of juvenile and adult interviews as well as a methamphetamine addendum, were released earlier in 2010.

[2] A specific definition was not given to arrestees regarding how gang affiliation was defined, allowing the individuals being interviewed to decide for themselves how they should be categorized. However, interviewers were instructed to include individuals who identified themselves as "skinheads" or "taggers" if asked.

BULLETIN HIGHLIGHTS

- Around one in every four arrestees self-reported some type of prior or current gang affiliation.
- Male arrestees were more likely than females to report being gang members and having gang conditions as part of their probation supervision, rather than just associating with a gang.
- Almost two-thirds (65%) of these arrestees reported that other family members are also in a gang, but not necessarily the same one.
- Males were more likely to say they joined a gang for protection and females were more likely to report being in a gang was important in their neighborhood.
- Arrestees were most likely to report their involvement in motor vehicle theft and tagging increased after becoming gang members, compared to other illegal behaviors.
- Almost half of these gang-affiliated arrestees report having carried a gun and most report it was easy to obtain.
- Sixty percent of those interviewed envisioned that at some point they would end their affiliation with the gang.
- Gang-affiliated arrestees differed from those who did not report gang involvement on a number of dimensions, including drug use histories and contact with the justice system.

Since 2004, when federal funding for the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program was suspended, San Diego has been the only site to continue this project uninterrupted. In 2009, this data collection effort was generously supported by the California Border Alliance Group (CBAG), County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services (ADS), the District Attorney's Office, and the Public Safety Group. Their support, as well as the support of the region's local jurisdictions through the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff's and Probation Departments, is gratefully acknowledged.

How Many Arrestees Report Having a Gang Affiliation?

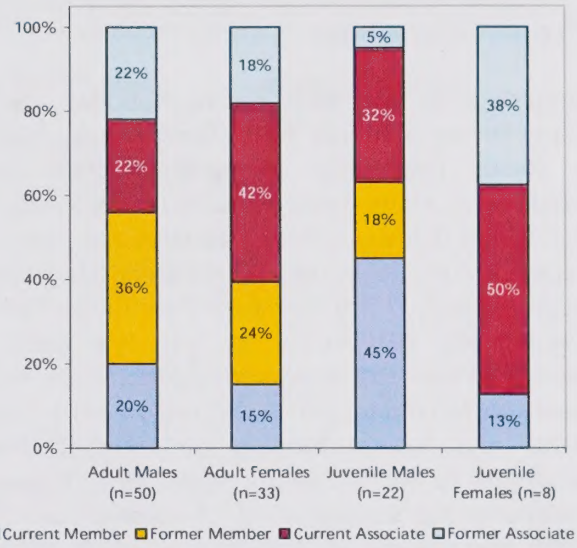
During 2009, 503 adult males, 275 adult females, 124 juvenile males, and 34 juvenile females were interviewed as part of the SAM program. Of these individuals, about one-quarter (23% of adult males and adult females, 21% of juvenile males, and 26% of juvenile females) reported having ever affiliated with a gang (not shown). For comparison purposes, research among samples of youth in high-risk areas of large U.S. cities suggests that from 15 to 32 percent of the youth have some history of gang affiliation (Howell, 2010.)

For the 35 juveniles with any self-reported affiliation (26 males and 9 females), 30 (86%) completed a gang addendum. For adults, only those who reported any affiliation within the past five years (52%) were asked to complete the gang addendum. Of these 93 adults, 83 completed an addendum (50 males and 33 females) and 10 did not (not shown).

What is the Nature of the Gang Affiliation for These Arrestees?

At the beginning of the gang addendum, interviewees were asked to describe if they were a current or former member, or a current or former associate. As Figure 1 shows, males (both adult and juvenile) were significantly more likely to report being members of a gang (56% of adults and 64% of juveniles, with "current" and "former" combined), while females were more likely to report they were associates (61% and 88%, respectively). In addition, juveniles (both males and females) were more likely to report current involvement (either membership or association) (73%), compared to adults (48%). The general consensus in the field is that gang associates are also involved in delinquent and criminal activity and, as such, prevention and intervention activities should not ignore this population, even though they are not formal members of the gang (Howell, 2010).

Figure 1
MALES MORE LIKELY TO REPORT GANG MEMBERSHIP THAN FEMALES



SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

In terms of this affiliation being known by the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, around half reported that they had been documented by law enforcement as a gang member (46%) and that they ever had gang conditions as part of their probation orders (45%). In addition, one-quarter (25%) said they had been under the supervision of the Probation Department's gang suppression unit. Males were significantly more likely than females to report each of these gang-related supervision requirements, including being documented (57% versus 29%) and having gang conditions (54% versus 29%) (not shown).

How Many of These Individuals Have Family Members in Gangs?

Around two-thirds (65%) of these arrestees with a gang affiliation reported that other family members were also in a gang, with over three-quarters (76%) of these reporting that this involvement was current. When asked if these relatives were in the same or a different gang, 19 percent said they were all in the same gang, 42 percent that some were in the same gang, and 39 percent that they were all in different gangs (not shown). When asked to describe how they

were related to these other individuals, the most common responses included cousins and siblings (Table 1). "Other" relatives include aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and blended family members.

Table 1
ARRESTEES MOST LIKELY TO REPORT COUSINS AND SIBLINGS ARE ALSO IN A GANG

Cousin	61%
Other	40%
Sibling	39%
Father	15%
Mother	6%
TOTAL	**72**

NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

How Did Gang Affiliation Begin For These Individuals?

Researchers agree that the dynamics of gang formation are complex and that youth joining an established gang do so typically in a manner similar to joining more mainstream organizations, with more informal association developing for some into formal membership (Howell, 2010). As such, arrestees were asked how old they were when they first became involved with the gang and, if they became a member, how much time passed before they joined. On average, these individuals reported being 13.5 years of age (SD = 4.2, range 5 to 37) when the association began and while some formally joined after as little as 7 days or as long as 10 years, the average was 2.1 years (SD = 2.2) (not shown).

When asked their motivation for becoming a gang member or associating with the gang, the most common reason given was that their friends also did (66%), followed by that it provided a network of belonging/peers for them (49%). In addition, more than one in three (39%) noted that their family members were involved with the gang. These findings of involvement being related to family and friend relations are consistent with cross-site longitudinal research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues. One gender difference that emerged was related to the gang providing protection, with males significantly more likely to cite this as a reason for joining (24%), compared to females (7%) (not shown).

When asked further about protection by the gang, almost three-quarters (73%) reported that the gang offered protection, with no difference by gender or age. When these 80 individuals were asked who was offered protection, 78 percent said their neighborhood, 74 percent themselves, and 56 percent their family (not shown).

Table 2
PEERS CITED AS TOP REASON FOR BEGINNING GANG INVOLVEMENT

Friends are members/associates	66%
Give sense of belonging	49%
Family is member/associate	39%
Drug dealing/making money	18%
Provides protection	18%
Provides status	13%
Forced/coerced	1%
TOTAL	**112**

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

When asked what individuals have to do to become a member of the gang, the most common method was being "jumped in" or fighting with someone else in the gang (88%), with others describing initiation as involving fighting someone in another gang (25%), committing illegal acts other than stealing (13%), theft (11%), or other actions (9%) (that vary from member to member and often relate to proving one's self and dedication to the gang) (not shown).

What Types of Activities Do These Individuals Report Engaging in With the Gang?

Arrestees who reported some type of current or past gang affiliation were asked whether they engaged in specific legal and illegal activities regularly with their friends/peers in the gang. As

Table 3 shows, almost all (98%) said that they hung out, with another 95 percent saying they get high or drunk, 81 percent get in fights, and 74 percent "cruise." Around one-third to over half also reported participating in a variety of illegal acts with their gang, including theft, tagging, and robbery. Juveniles were significantly more likely than adults to report doing graffiti as a gang-related activity (77% versus 48%, respectively) (not shown).

Table 3
GANG-INVOLVED ARRESTEES REPORT PARTICIPATING IN BOTH CRIMINAL AND NON-CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Hang out	98%
Get high/drunk	95%
Get in fights	81%
Cruise	74%
Theft	58%
Graffiti	56%
Robbery	50%
Vandalism	38%
Motor vehicle theft	37%
Other	7%
TOTAL	**110**

NOTES: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

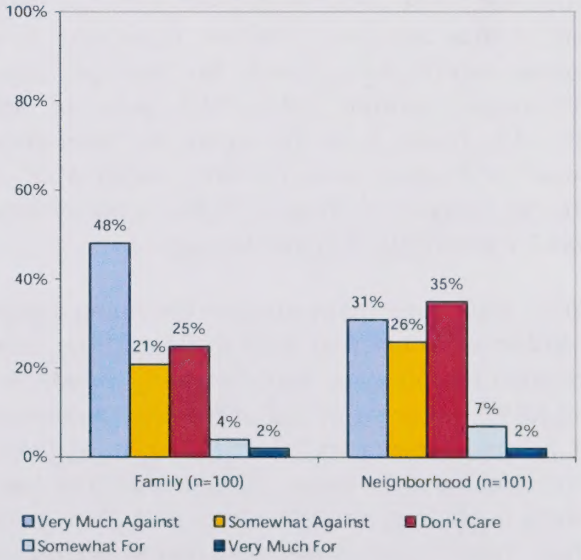
When asked if they communicated with or about the gang on social networking sites, there was a significant difference, with around one in five (21%) juveniles reporting that they did, compared to only 4 percent of adults. This growing use of the Internet by gang-affiliated individuals is consistent with anecdotal information from local law enforcement agencies.

What Social Factors Do These Individuals Perceive Are Related to Gang Affiliation?

When asked how their families and neighbors felt about gang involvement, around half (48%) said their family was "very much against" their involvement, compared to around one in three (31%) of their neighbors feeling this way about gangs in general (Figure 2). In terms of family opinion, an interesting gender difference was identified, with males significantly more likely to report their family was "very much against" or "somewhat against" their involvement, compared to females (81% versus 47%, respectively) (not shown). In addition, it is interesting to note that around one in ten (11%) overall reported that their family was not aware of their involvement and therefore could not have an opinion (not shown).

For neighbors, there was no difference between adults and juveniles or by gender, but the difference compared to the family ratings is worth noting. Specifically, 44 percent said that others they live near "didn't care" or were in favor of gang involvement to some degree (Figure 2). This finding is of interest because research examining risk factors for gang membership has found that neighborhood characteristics may exert influence indirectly through overall disorganization, lack of resources, and the inhibition of prosocial bonds (Howell & Egley, 2005).

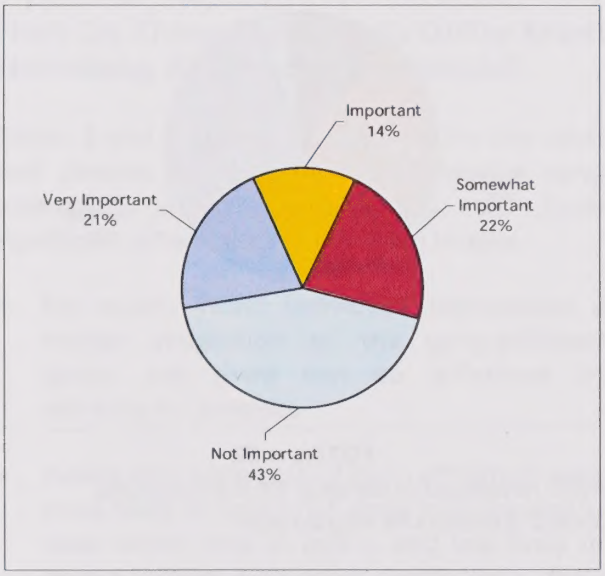
Figure 2
MOST ARRESTEES SAY FAMILIES CARE ABOUT GANG INVOLVEMENT BUT NEIGHBORHOOD DOES NOT



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

Related to neighborhood reaction to gang involvement, respondents also offered different views about how important gang membership was for youth in their neighborhood, with some feeling it was "very important" or "important" (35% combined), while others felt it was "somewhat important" (22%) or "not important" (44%) (Figure 3). Another gender difference worth noting was that females were significantly more likely to report that gang membership was "important" or "somewhat important," compared to males (62% versus 21%, respectively) (not shown).

Figure 3
ARRESTEES DIFFER REGARDING HOW IMPORTANT GANG MEMBERSHIP IS FOR YOUTH IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD



TOTAL = 100

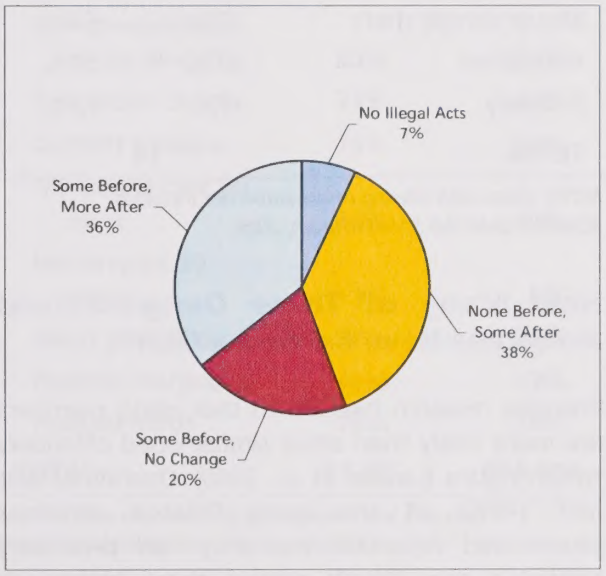
NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

How Involved Are Gang Members in Illegal Activity Before and After Affiliation Begins?

According to leading researchers such as Maxson and Klein (2006), one of the most enduring findings in the field is that youth who join gangs commit more crime than those who do not and that gang members also commit a variety of different illegal acts (i.e., they are generalists rather than specialists). As such, gang members were asked if they had committed illegal acts prior to joining the gang, as well as if they had begun to commit acts or if the frequency of these acts had increased after they joined the gang. As Figure 4 shows, just over one-third (36%) answered affirmatively to both questions – they committed illegal acts before joining the gang and the frequency of these acts increased after joining - and 38 percent said they did not engage in illegal activity before, but they did after association began. In addition, 20 percent said they committed illegal acts before and after joining with no change in frequency and 7 percent said committing illegal acts was never an issue.

Figure 4
MOST GANG MEMBERS REPORT COMMITTING SOME CRIME BEFORE MEMBERSHIP, AS WELL AS AN INCREASE AFTER JOINING



TOTAL = 56

NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

As Table 4 shows, for the 19 individuals who reported engaging in illegal activity before joining the gang, as well as an increase after doing so, the acts that appeared to increase the most included motor vehicle theft (37% versus 58%) and graffiti/tagging (53% versus 74%). When all of the gang members were asked with whom they most often committed these illegal acts (after becoming a gang member), 60 percent said they did so with fellow gang members, 33 percent alone, and 8 percent with non-gang individuals (not shown).

Table 4
ILLEGAL ACTIONS INCREASE AFTER GANG MEMBERSHIP

	Before	After
Getting drunk/high	95%	95%
Fights	79%	89%
Graffiti/tagging	53%	74%
Theft	58%	68%
Dealing drugs	58%	68%
Motor vehicle theft	37%	58%
Vandalism	53%	53%
Robbery	47%	53%
TOTAL	**19**	

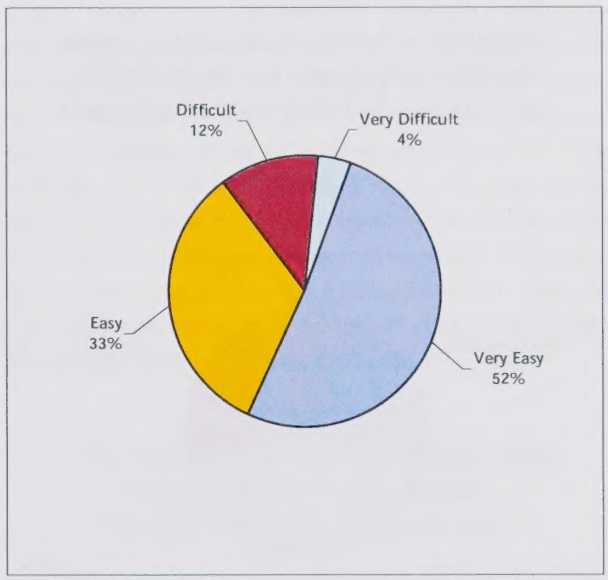
NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

How Many of These Gang-Involved Arrestees Have Carried a Gun?

Previous research has shown that gang members are more likely than other similar aged offenders to carry guns (Lizotte et al., 2000). Overall, almost half (46%) of the gang-affiliated arrestees interviewed reported that they had previously carried a gun. Worth noting, those individuals who reported ever carrying a gun were significantly more likely to report they dealt drugs after becoming involved in the gang (71%), compared to those who had never carried a gun (36%). When asked how they had obtained the gun, the most frequent response was through a friend or other gang member (57%), followed by that they had bought it from someone off the street (33%), gotten it from a family member (8%), or purchased it from a store (6%). In addition, 8 percent described other ways, which included "finding it" or stealing it from someone (not shown).

When individuals who had ever carried a gun were asked how difficult it was to obtain one, around four in five (85%) said "very easy" or "easy" combined (Figure 5).

Figure 5
MOST GANG-AFFILIATED ARRESTEES WHO HAVE CARRIED A GUN REPORT IT IS EASY OR VERY EASY TO GET ONE



TOTAL = 52

NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

Do Any of Those With Current Affiliations Want to Leave This Lifestyle?

According to the research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues, the majority of gang participation is limited to one year or less, with most gang members ending their affiliation voluntarily at some point in time. For this interview, arrestees who reported current affiliation with a gang were asked if they wanted to end it. Around one in three (32%) said they did. However, around one-quarter (24%) of these 21 individuals said that, even though they wanted to, they felt they could not leave for a variety of

reasons, including that they would fear reprisals from fellow gang members (5 of the 9 respondents) or other gang members (1), and that they are tied to the gang through their family (3). In another question regarding if they ever envisioned the affiliation ending (perhaps not now, but eventually), 60 percent of the respondents said yes – which included 20 of the 21 individuals who expressed an interest in leaving now, as well as 17 other individuals (not shown).

When asked if they knew of any people or programs in the community that could assist them in ending this association, only around one in three (38%) responded affirmatively, suggesting that there are further opportunities for outreach and education to this population across the region (not shown).

How Do These Individuals Differ From Non-Gang Affiliated Individuals?

Tables 5 and 6 present comparisons for the adult and juvenile arrestees who completed a gang addendum and those who did not. Some significant differences worth noting include:

- For adults, White individuals represented a smaller proportion of the gang-affiliated group, but there was no difference by ethnicity for juveniles.
- Adults with some type of gang affiliation were more likely to have prior arrest histories and to have served time in prison, and less likely to have a current high arrest charge for a drug-related offense, despite the fact that they were more likely to use a number of drugs in the past and recently.
- Juveniles with some type of gang affiliation had lengthier arrest histories, were more likely to have siblings with justice system contact, and were more likely to have brought a weapon to school. They were also more likely to have a greater history of substance use, consistent with research on predictive factors for gang-affiliation (Howell, 2010).

Table 5
ADULT ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG AFFILIATIONS DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
Demographics		
White	25%	40%
Justice Related		
Ever arrested	87%	74%
Ever prison	33%	23%
Ever pimped	15%	4%
Current drug charge	23%	38%
Substance Use		
Ever marijuana	96%	79%
Ever binge alcohol	88%	78%
Ever meth	67%	47%
Ever cocaine	54%	42%
Ever prescription drugs illegally	60%	38%
Ever other drugs	71%	42%
Current tobacco	75%	62%
Marijuana past 30 days	65%	40%
Heroin past 30 days	13%	5%
Meth past 30 days	37%	22%
Positive marijuana	46%	33%
Positive meth	39%	26%
TOTAL	**81-83**	**684-695**

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

Table 6
JUVENILE ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG AFFILIATIONS DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
Demographics		
Has children	17%	2%
Justice Related		
Number of previous arrests	4.6	3.0
Siblings have had contact with system	59%	38%
Ever brought a weapon to school	43%	20%
Substance Use		
Ever meth	37%	19%
Ever crack	20%	3%
Ever inhalants	30%	15%
Ever rohypnol	20%	6%
Ever prescription illegally	47%	23%
Ever over-the-counter drugs illegally	30%	14%
Binge alcohol past 30 days	60%	31%
Meth past 30 days	13%	2%
Rohypnol past 30 days	13%	1%
Received treatment	47%	27%
TOTAL	**24-30**	**77-124**

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2009

Summary

In 2008, the Criminal Justice Research Division of SANDAG implemented an addendum to the adult and juvenile Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) survey conducted with arrestees in San Diego County. The purpose of this addendum was to capture additional insights that would be useful to local practitioners and policy makers regarding gangs in the San Diego region.

The results of these interviews in 2009 revealed that current gang affiliation (either membership or association) was more common for juveniles than adults and males were more likely to report membership than females. The most common reasons for affiliating with the gang initially related to peers who were doing so or family who were involved in the gang lifestyle, although it appears that many family members were active in different gangs, not necessarily the same one as the respondent. Gang members reported they first began associating with the gang around the age of 13 on average, that initiation commonly involved violent acts, and that many perceived the gang would offer protection to them, their families, and neighborhoods. Once in the gang, individuals reported participating in both legal and illegal activities, although it was clear that there was an increase in criminal activities, including motor vehicle theft and tagging. Consistent with prior research, most of those interviewed either reported they had already stopped associating with the gang or anticipated that they would at some point.

While this information should be interpreted acknowledging obvious limitations (e.g., self-report nature of the information, including that the nature of the gang relationship was self-defined), it is consistent with other research in the field and speaks to the need for comprehensive strategies to address gang involvement that include prevention, intervention, and suppression.

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